

If not a shaman, then what? Margie Gillis and trance

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Volume 30, Number 1, 2008

Danse au Canada
Dance in Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018839ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/018839ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cauthery, B. (2008). If not a shaman, then what? Margie Gillis and trance. *Ethnologies*, 30(1), 141–155. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018839ar>

Article abstract

Reflecting on his fieldwork among the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte in the western Indian Ocean, Canadian anthropologist Michael Lambek questions why the West has such a “blind spot” when it comes to the human activity of trance. Querying the West’s blind spot has led me to argue that trance, as related in the ethnographic record, may be perceived as an attribute or characteristic of the Other. In this article, celebrated Canadian modern dancer Margie Gillis’ relationship with trance in her creative and performance practice is explored. Trance becomes an-Other entry point — one that has not been touched upon during Gillis’ lifetime — for interpreting both her role as a performer and her performing body.

IF NOT A SHAMAN, THEN WHAT?

Margie Gillis and trance

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Reflecting on his fieldwork among the Malagasy speakers of Mayotte in the western Indian Ocean, Canadian anthropologist Michael Lambek questions why the West has such a “blind spot” when it comes to the human activity of trance. Immersed in his subject’s trance practices, he questions why such a fundamental aspect of both the Malagasy culture, and many other cultures he has studied around the world, is absent from his own.

Lambek provides the jumping off point for my doctoral research into the West’s preoccupation with trance in ethnographic research and simultaneous disinclination to attribute or situate trance within its own dance practices. In Lambek’s own words, “the question for the West becomes one of understanding why trance has been so rigidly excluded or ignored” (1981: 7). Querying the West’s blind spot has led me to argue that the accumulated knowledge and data about trance is a by-product of the colonialist project, and that trance itself may be perceived as an attribute or characteristic of the Other. In suggesting that trance could be recast, I explore the cultural history of trance in the West and, in particular, I examine the degree to which trance can be a meaningful construct within the cultural analysis of contemporary dance creation and performance.

Hailed as the “Isadora Duncan of the late twentieth century,” Canadian modern dancer Margie Gillis is a national celebrity (Crabb 1995). Gillis’ complex and iconic image is created and enacted through a pastiche of information and performances — her choreography, her biography, press information and media coverage, reviews of her work, the way she speaks about herself in public forums such as her website and dance dialogues, and her interaction with members of her audience.

What is absent from these interpretations is acknowledgement of Gillis' indebtedness to trance. Trance — what Gillis calls “transformation” to avoid “new age-y” connotations (Gillis 2006) — pervades her creative, choreographic and performance processes and is implicated in theorizing the vital and visceral connections she makes between herself, her work and her audience. Asked to contextualize the role trance plays in her creative work, it is clear that trance functions discursively and is rooted in a cultural and rhetorical context that is collaboratively constructed. Trance becomes “an Other” entry point — one that has not been touched upon during her lifetime — for interpreting both her role as a performer and her performing body.

Gillis, a dancer, choreographer, teacher and artistic director of her own company, was born in Montréal, Québec, in 1953. Her parents were both Olympic skiers, and she and her three siblings inherited their parents' athleticism: a sister pursued freestyle skiing, a brother became a professional hockey player, and Margie and her brother Christopher became modern dancers. Gillis started dance lessons at age three and perceives that she consciously began to cultivate a style of her own in her early teens. Gillis' first solo performance as a professional took place in Vancouver in 1975. In 1979, she became the first Western modern dancer and teacher to tour China after the Cultural Revolution. In 1981, Gillis was appointed Canadian Cultural Ambassador by then Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. The same year she founded the Margie Gillis Dance Foundation to support her activities as a solo artist.

Gillis' career as a soloist was strongly influenced by her experiences as a child where a “bodycentric” response was valued. Gillis states that throughout her childhood and adolescence, her parents emphasized a fully integrated kinaesthetic approach to learning and experiencing their bodies. When one of the Gillis children fell or misjudged their body positioning while in the process of a physical act — running, jumping, throwing, washing dishes — one or other parent would ask them what falling *felt* like, what they *saw*, *smelled* or *imagined* before, during and after the fall. The children were urged to verbalize their recollected sensations and analyze their responses at the time and then in retrospect. In this way, from an early age, Gillis learned to value, engage and reflect on the information and stimuli that she derived from her moving body. She learned that her body was a source of endless knowledge, complexity and nuance and that physical actions could not be construed as either positive or negative regardless of any possible repercussions (Gillis 2006).

Gillis was aware from an early age of her capacity to enter altered states of consciousness. She uses her capacity to experience what she refers to as “transformation” for creative, choreographic and expressive purposes. As a professional dancer and choreographer, transformation functions in all areas of her artistic life and output. Her method for accessing transformative states has formalized over years of experimenting and improvisation to become a technique that she now teaches to others called “dancing from the inside.” Gillis teaches this technique in workshops, residencies and master classes to novice and professional dancers across Canada and the United States. She believes that all people, to a greater or lesser extent, share the capacity to access transformative states and that through awareness and self-actualization dancers can attune themselves to the potential of transformation as a creative tool.

As a creative tool, transformation forms the basis of Gillis’ movement explorations in the studio. Working from physical impulses, images, feelings or ideas, Gillis allows what she refers to as her subconscious to take over and guide her movement. While her choice of imagery may be predetermined, the impetus to move in response to the idea is not. Gillis’ method for entering a state of trance is based on the notion of being sensitized to

the connection between thought, emotion, spirit and body. This is the natural kinetic process whereby our inner “landscape” translates into electrical impulses that move through our nervous system transmitting the message to the muscles and connective tissue as to how and with what quality to move (Gillis 2006).

Gillis allows movement to evolve organically allowing physical responses to take precedence without censorship or conscious direction. Movements ebb and flow, subtle and minute or expansive and chaotic, allegro or adagio, staccato or legato. Gillis does not know where her explorations will take her, but simply opens herself up to their potential. While this may sound formless, she is very clear about the intention of each movement exploration and goes into the studio seeking elaboration of a specific theme or image. By mapping the flow of images or impulses in a journal and reviewing her notes before each rehearsal, she can access the same range of movements in successive sessions in the studio. Altering the order of the images will alter the outcome. In this way she creates a score for herself that guides her transformative journey, a process she perceives as akin to “peeling back layers of skin from an

onion” (Gillis 2006). Each session draws her deeper into her unconscious and solidifies the links between interior experience, kinaesthetic awareness and physical movement.

The creation process for a piece can take many months or even years since the possibilities for movement and image integration mature and change as she carries the ideas through time. Gradually Gillis will bring trusted colleagues into the studio to watch and comment on the movement she has discovered. For many years Gillis invited former dancer and choreographer Stephanie Ballard to observe her in the studio, but most recently Gillis has been using Daniel Jackson as her “artistic advisor.” Jackson has been active as a dancer, artistic director and rehearsal director in Montréal since 1961. Elizabeth Zimmer interviewed Jackson for her article on “co-pilots” in modern dance.

I started out coaching her dance and realized I was making a huge mistake. I entered a place of silence which enabled me to become as much a creator as Margie is. A good coach is also the dancer. Both of us are the student, and both the teacher. It has nothing to do with how I’m going to make it better the next day. It’s about the joy we share. We keep ourselves fresh. That’s why I’m in this business at this age (Jackson in Zimmer 2004).

Gillis states that Jackson’s presence in the studio and feedback help her to “go deeper” and to take greater risks with the movement. To some degree Jackson’s relationship with Gillis parallels that of an analyst as he works to focus, clarify and challenge her choreographic choices. Although Gillis will work consistently with the same image score, at this stage of the process the movement becomes more formally choreographed through the change from a self-reflective to a more outwardly directed focus. The movement is still absolutely tied to her interior ideologue but the work is now fashioned to address and project Gillis’ intention in order that an audience may apprehend it. In effect, through her explorations, Gillis creates her own movement language that may be indecipherable to an outsider. The introduction of an observer forces Gillis to reshape or redirect her movement, to sharpen or clarify it, so that the ideas she is seeking to convey are poignant and intelligible. Gillis continues to enter trance states but, with each rehearsal, the patterns of movement become more fixed and consistent.

In the performance phase, Gillis continues to rely on transformation as an expressive tool. She follows her image score as it has been

developed and set, once again allowing herself to enter into an altered state of consciousness. Her pieces, she explains, are never about steps or counts, but are visceral manifestations of her psychological explorations (Gillis 2006). The rigour with which she approaches her creative process ensures that her performances are not free-form improvisations. While she invents and then performs her choreography through the medium of trance there is a coherent structure to the work she produces. Her movement is constructed via “inner visions being made physical with searing honesty” (Greenaway 1997: 58) and in performance, transformation remains key. Even when performing the works of other choreographers with multiple dancers, Gillis claims to rely on transformation to inject the choreography with her own personal style (Gillis 2006). She maintains that even when dancing another choreographer’s movement in a trance state, she is able to stay true to the choreography and has not been responsible for any missteps or mishaps on stage. Presumably choreographers choose to cast Gillis for her virtuosic qualities and direct her accordingly.

Gillis sees similarities between her practice and some of the tenets of Sufism — a mystic tradition within Islam based on the pursuit of a singular, spiritual truth. Sufism’s search for one truth, its aspiration of unity with God through the rejection of one’s self and its mystical tradition, align Gillis’ practice with Expressionist principles. In particular, Gillis appreciates Sufism’s focus on beliefs attained through mystic practices where Truth or God is based on the notion of divine love, and she draws parallels between her understanding of the Sufi notion of divine love and her own experiences of transformation. She invokes Sufi-derived concepts to describe the effect that trance has on her body and on her interactions with the world beyond herself (Gillis 2006).

The combination of her capacity to enter trance states, her at times profound healing connection with her audience, might lead one to consider that Gillis, particularly in performance, possesses certain shamanistic qualities. Such a hypothesis, though controversial, may be argued on a number of levels. For example, in many cultures where shamanism is practiced, the shaman takes on his or her clients’ physical and mental illnesses and, through dancing and ritualized acts and/or props, enters a trance state that allows him/her to communicate with the spirits. The shaman seeks to propitiate the spirits in order that the clients may be cured and/or find relief from what ails them. This is how the role of the shaman in the *kut* ceremonies of Korea (Covell 1984;

Lee 1981; Harvey 1979), the *zar* cult in the Sudan (Deagon 1994; al Nagar 1987) and the Jombee rituals in Montserrat (Desmangles 1989) have been interpreted by ethnographers. While Gillis does not actively engage with either her trance states or members of her audience in this manner, there are some interesting parallels when one considers the following example: following one performance, a very tall woman came backstage. When she entered Gillis' dressing room, the tall woman asked where she might find Margie Gillis. Gillis replied that she was Margie Gillis and the woman refused to believe that Gillis, at only five foot three inches, was the same "tall dancer" that the woman had just seen perform. When Gillis asked her to elaborate, the woman explained that she was quite certain she had just seen an extremely tall woman like herself dancing proudly and assertively on stage. To the tall woman's mind, this "tall dancer" performed her tallness without apology or meekness and so she had come backstage to tell that dancer how inspiring and healing her performance was. Though she went away clearly confused and disappointed, Gillis was certain that her performance was a help to the woman who treated her tallness as an affliction (Gillis 2006).

Whether as a defence mechanism to traumatic psychological events in her childhood (she suffered a nervous breakdown at age eight), as a process towards self-healing or simply a tendency towards daydreaming and introversion, Gillis' ability to "transform" herself became an intrinsic aspect of her personality. "I was never *there* as a child," she explains, "I was always somewhere else" (Gillis 2006). Whatever circumstances or qualities predispose Gillis to enter trance states, she has continued to develop and hone this particular aptitude in her creative work. It could be argued that Gillis' nervous breakdown as a child was her "calling" to become a shaman. In describing the difference between priests and shamans, Joseph Campbell provides a basis for suggesting that Gillis' nervous breakdown could be construed as a psychological crisis that predicted her future vocation as a shaman:

the priest is the socially initiated, ceremonially inducted member of a recognized religious organization, where he holds a certain rank and functions as the tenant of an office that was held by others before him, while the shaman is one who, as a consequence of a personal psychological crisis, has gained a certain power of his own (Campbell 1976: 231).

A shaman may be initiated through a serious illness, by being struck by lightning, or by a near-death experience and there usually is a set of

cultural images associated with each method of initiation. According to Mircea Eliade, such imagery often includes being transported to the spirit world and interacting with beings inhabiting it, meeting a spiritual guide, being devoured by some being and emerging transformed, and/or being “dismantled” and “reassembled” again, often with implanted amulets such as magical crystals. The imagery of initiation generally speaks of transformation and the granting of special powers, and often entails themes of death and rebirth. In some societies shamanic powers are considered to be inherited, whereas in others, shamans are considered to have been “called”. Eliade provides the example of the Siberian Chukchis shamans who behave in ways that Western clinicians would characterize as psychotic, but which Siberian culture interprets as possession by a spirit who demands that one assume the shamanic vocation (Eliade 2004: 219). Gillis, likewise, draws a distinction between conscious and unconscious control in trance, speaking of the point at which she is no longer “dancing” but “being danced.” She also describes herself as a “vehicle” or “vessel” for the act of transformation (Gillis 2006). In her ethnography of trance dance in West Java, Kathy Foley makes a similar distinction. In distinguishing theatrical recreations from authentic trance rituals, she defines

the dancer as the performer who maintains his or her self-awareness while impersonating another, and the danced as those who strive for an altered trance state and allow themselves to become mediums for another presence — a phenomenon known as possession trance. Though the state of consciousness provides a demarcation line between these two types of performance, it is my hypothesis that the theatrical dancers are, in some sense, “danced” by the spirit of these... trance forms (Foley 1985: 29).

Foley also describes the positioning of the danced as of “an empty vessel in which another persona can manifest itself” (1985: 36).

But whether certain behaviour is construed as “possession” and certain illnesses as examples of shamanic calling, as psychiatric anthropologist Erika Bourguignon explains, is a matter of cultural context. The cultural meaning supplied for these states and the institutional framework within which they operate vary from society to society, and thus the specific functions they fulfil vary as well (Bourguignon 1973: 3). The fact that Gillis is not seen as a shaman is because of the absence of “shaman” as a cultural category in Western, European-derived, Christian-influenced society. Despite the similarities,

including her childhood psychological illness that coincided with periods of withdrawal to altered states of consciousness and the deep and potentially healing connections she makes with members of her audience, casting Gillis as a shaman remains contentious. There is nothing to be gained from *othering* her and her performance in this way except to see that her choice to employ trance and how she came to discover her capacity to trance is exceptional according to Canadian cultural standards. Even when such behaviour does not construct her as a shaman in the eyes of her culture, interpreting Gillis as a shaman figure points to the absence of such vocational choices. That Canadian society does not recognize indigenous shamans does not preclude Canadians from possessing shamanic qualities. Interpreting some of the qualities Gillis embodies as shamanic suggests a transgressive space that might otherwise be overlooked.

Even when a culture recognizes both trance and shamanism, such recognition does not ensure wholesale or unmitigated acceptance. In her ethnography of shamanic dance in Japan, Irit Averbuch, a doctor of comparative religion and a specialist in Japanese spiritualism, argues that the occurrence or appearance of trance is created by an understanding between audience and performers. Each knows the signals or actions that signify the presence of a deity and the introduction of a trance state (Averbuch 1998: 320). Averbuch's analysis suggests that in performances that do not overtly include or propose a trance state, recognition of trance cannot be brokered between performer and audience. Averbuch argues that trance is not "real" unless the performer and audience jointly acknowledge it. Her theory raises a number of issues. Whether without the audience's awareness or participation, a trance state can occur; whether a performer's experiences of trance is authentic if only he or she acknowledges it; and whether without the audience's validation the trance state is significant. In Averbuch's examples, if audience members perceive that a certain performance of trance is inadequate because of its failure to accord with certain ritualized movements or actions, then the trance state is not credible (322).

If a given culture does not have a framework in which to situate, let alone validate, the manifestation of trance then the question of how to reify a trance "act" in the absence of cultural convention or tradition becomes problematic. The combination of the need for cultural recognition of trance as suggested by Bourguignon and the need for audience/performer dialogue and consensus to legitimize trance as

suggested by Averbuch, would seem to deny Gillis' self-acknowledged use of trance. Yet casting Westerners as shamans is not without precedent. Anthropologist Harry Anthony Senn makes a very convincing case for viewing Carl Jung as a shaman, arguing that likewise he exhibits the five "classic" stages of the shamanic journey (Senn 1989: 113). Additional evidence exists in cross-cultural analyses such as American psychiatric anthropologist Roger Walsh's comparison of shamanic, Buddhist, yogic and schizophrenic altered states of consciousness (Walsh 1993). Gillis' use of transformation, her impact on members of her audience and the similarities that may be seen to exist between her practice and those of some non-Western shamanic practices and initiation provide compelling evidence. Despite the cultural implausibility of constructing Gillis as a shaman figure, it remains that Gillis' acknowledgement and premeditated use of trance needs to be adequately framed and theorized in terms that pertain to her own culture. Walsh offers his attempt at framing shamanism adequately in terms that pertain to one's own culture. In 1987, he published *The Spirit of Shamanism*. Ten years later, the article "The Psychological Health of Shamans: A Re-evaluation" appeared in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Though Walsh is soundly criticized by Daniel C. Noel for re-publishing his earlier work with scant evidence of re-evaluation (Noel 1998), a more apt criticism of both the original and its derivative is the application of Western medical principles to non-Western subjects. Walsh engages in a process of "diagnosing" shamans. He suggests that among "mainstream" academics — meaning those not trained in psychiatry or psychology — shamans have been assessed as "psychologically disturbed individuals who have managed to adapt their psychopathology to social needs" (Walsh 1997: 101).

Though he is himself critical of the trend in popular literature to equate the altered states of consciousness attained by shamanic practitioners with those reported by "yogis and Buddhists," he seems unaware of his own exercise in cultural relativism. Walsh evaluates accounts of shamanic behaviour for their correlations to epilepsy, hysteria, schizophrenia and other "psychotic disorders." Though he writes of the "risks" of imposing "Western cultural and diagnostic perspectives" because they may devalue and "pathologize" shamanic practice, the sense is that such risk-taking is within acceptable limits when performed by trained professionals. With regard to anthropologists mistakenly labelling shamans as "epileptics," Walsh concludes that the "situation

is exacerbated because many anthropologists have not known the correct questions to ask in order to allow accurate diagnosis.” A similar lack of knowledge would appear to account for, in Walsh’s estimation, the dubious application of schizophrenia to explain the “bizarre” characteristics of shamanic experience to the uninitiated “Western mind” (1997: 105, 111). Walsh opposes anthropologists diagnosing their subjects on the basis of inadequate training. While he agrees with Åke Hultkrantz, a noted scholar of comparative religions and specialist in northern European shamanism, that there can be no universal definition for shamanism, Walsh does not question the universal application of psychiatric diagnosis to shamans and shamanic practice (Hultkrantz 1978).

After Gillis’ nervous breakdown, her withdrawals into trance states were considered unhealthy and potentially psychotic. Gillis recalls that specialists recommended that she be hospitalized. Her mother refused and instead chose to let her daughter navigate this phase of her psychological development in an atmosphere of acceptance and safety without intervention — medical or otherwise. Gradually Gillis learned to manage her ability to access her unconscious at will, becoming able to choose when, where and how deeply to enter transformative states. It is extremely unlikely that Walsh, had he examined Gillis, would have postulated that her mental breakdown was her “calling” to become a shaman. Though invested in evaluating the psychological health of shamans, his practice is predicated on the assumption that shamans exist outside the West. Though he advises against confusing “clinic with culture,” the characteristics that comprise each sphere are impermeable and Eurocentric. He fails to recognize that the critical issues are the desire to *pathologize* shamanic practice in the first place, and the assumption that evidence of such pathology exists elsewhere, even when cases such as Gillis’ exhibit remarkable similarities. Walsh’s lack of self-reflexive, culturally flexible theories or principles to contextualize shamanic behaviour both *within* and *outside* the West creates an extremely narrow and xenophobic field.

Alice B. Kehoe, a professor of social and cultural studies, perceives that the tendency towards identifying shamans in cultures where shamanism is not practiced has enabled and sustained a European primitivist tradition that amounts to cultural imperialism. Kehoe argues that Eliade and Hultkrantz have “fed the romantic demiurge” to view indigenous people as “primal survivals husbanding an archaic ecstasy that may yet save the White millions who suffer from... an inability to

lead authentic lives.” Eliade, in particular, through his widely read and highly regarded research, created a “new humanism” popularized by New Age adherents as “neo-shamanism” (Kehoe 1996: 377). Kehoe outlines the evolution of the notion of shamanism from its original and specific application to the religious and spiritual practices of Siberian and subarctic peoples, to religious practice in opposition to Western institutionalized religion that feature trance states, to contemporary “shamanism” evoked for the purposes of healing and/or self-expression. Invoking the work of anthropologists David Holmberg, Nicholas Thomas and Caroline Humphrey, Kehoe suggests that the continuation of “shamanism” as an object of formal study is an “illusion” nurtured by the “broader cultural preoccupation with the primordial and transgressive” (1996: 378-379). It is this preoccupation that feeds the academic and New Age industries’ hunger for reassurance that there are still corners of the world that are as yet untouched and pristine. Finally Kehoe takes issue with labelling the “personal numinosity” attributed to spiritual or community leaders as “shamanistic” when it is merely “charisma” (378). British ethnomusicologist Keith Howard offers a more balanced view by suggesting that while trance and/or ecstasy are “key features in most accounts of shamanism... it is clear that charisma often coexists” (2000: 363).

The word charisma is derived from the Greek for “gift” or “divine favour” and is most commonly used to describe persons who possess extreme charm and a “magnetic” personality. Such traits often coincide with innate and sophisticated communication skills and a seemingly uncanny ability to charm and/or influence others. Charismatic people easily draw attention to themselves and garner admiration from their milieu. They generally project unusual confidence, calmness, assertiveness, authenticity and focus of purpose. Whether such qualities are “divinely” bestowed or are taught and/or learned is culturally relative.

German sociologist Max Weber defined charismatic authority to be one of three forms of authority, the other two being traditional or feudal authority and legal or rational authority. According to Weber, charisma is defined as

a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which s/he is “set apart” from ordinary people and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis

of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber 1947: 317).

Influenced by Weber, in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) stresses that a leader has charisma only if other people *accept* that s/he has it. Bourdieu argues that charisma usually results from an “inaugural act” such as a decisive battle or moving speech after which the person will be regarded as charismatic.

Charisma has also been studied as a set of psychological behaviours or qualities where it is an aggregative, or a conglomeration of distinct personality traits. According to British psychologist Richard Wiseman, who has been working with aspiring pop stars to improve their charismatic quotient, a charismatic person has certain attributes including the capacity to experience their own emotions quite strongly and to induce a strong emotional response in others (Geoghegan 2005). While Gillis’ life story exhibits certain shamanistic characteristics, the construction of Gillis as a charismatic leader may be more plausible.

Gillis’ dancing body is athletic, influenced by postmodern mores and technology, and responsive to a breadth of emotional response and kinaesthesia that makes her and her performances extremely potent and “of the moment” in spite of overt connections to early modern dancers such as Isadora Duncan. It is unclear whether Gillis is reacting against what she sees as the “think body” — a postmodern body increasingly *technologized* through engagement with multiple and often competing levels of communication such as e-mail, mobile phones, i-Pods, etc. — by preserving and investing in a naturalized physicality. More likely she is simply following and then capitalizing on what she perceives to be her calling — mystical, shamanic, charismatic or otherwise.

For the purposes of my research, Gillis and her use of trance is a key and fruitful source. Her purported creative process and performance modes clearly indicate, even if she herself is not comfortable with using the word, that trance as a discourse exists in Western contemporary performance practice. But my own response to Gillis as a performer and my various attempts to frame and deconstruct her use of trance has left me feeling uneasy and with very little solid ground on which to stand. Engaging with her as a text to be read has yielded interesting juxtapositions between modern and postmodern concepts. She is a charismatic performer; aspects of her life and the effect she has on her

audience could be argued to correlate to certain generalized shamanic practices and initiations. It is as though she has a slippery surface or veneer onto which ideas may be projected but will not gel.

Gillis is idealized for her indefatigable expressivity, her integrity and her commitment to her choreographic and performance process. Where many of Gillis' contemporaries value form, her body of work is consistently founded on function and emotion and it is this approach that has been perceived as both pioneering and evidence of her greatness. She seeks to express what is inside her, and in doing so, clearly relies on a kind of trance that is "natural" to her. Beyond these traits, what appears key to her practice is her capacity to be for her audience what they need her to be in the moment of her performance — whether that be tall, short, young, old, child-like, womanly, ethereal or grounded.

Having felt ostracized by childhood events and in need of identification with practices and/or belief systems that reflected her own experiences, Gillis turned to Sufism. Her reading of trance in the Other cultures as a means of accessing and shaping creativity confirmed her special status and gratified her active need for association with, and dissociation from, her native culture. She set herself apart, defined that apartness and then sought to reintegrate herself into her chosen milieu. Her capacity to use transformative states shaped the methodology of her creative process and her "dancing from the inside" technique. Within this is a very strong element of liminality. In viewing Gillis, one is aware of the journey she takes and one chooses to participate in her performance. In the creation of this meaningful in-between space, she and her audience members are able to create a narrative drawn from what they see, what they know and what they feel. If, as she claims, she enters a state of trance onstage, then her audience to some degree interacts with her altered state of consciousness vicariously. Gillis succeeds in making trance acceptable and accessible. In the absence of affirmative models for trance experience in the West, Gillis has sourced and created modes of self-analysis and expression that frame and validate this key — and otherwise neglected — aspect of her practice.

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